Style Shifting as a Measurement of Linguistic and Cultural Improvement during Education Abroad in Japan*

Hiromi Tobaru
California State University, Fullerton

Abstract
The current study investigates Japanese style shifting as an additional measurement of linguistic and cultural competence during education abroad (EdA) in Japan. Seven undergraduate students in a Midwest university in the U.S. participated in the current study. OPI interviews were conducted before and after EdA in Japan, which were used as data in the current research. For quantitative analysis, all sentence matrix predicates were divided into plain forms, *masu* forms, and fragments (i.e. incomplete sentence) by following Iwasaki's (2008) data analysis. For qualitative analysis, all plain forms were categorized into informal speech style plain form (IfSS-PF), detached speech style plain form (DtSS-PF), and others by examining the functions of each plain form. The findings revealed that all the participants used *masu* forms predominantly. This suggests that all of the participants were able to use appropriate speech style in a formal interview setting. In addition, participants whose OPI ratings were Intermediate-Low or lower tended to use IfSS-PF more than DtSS-PF in their style shifting, and some of the IfSS-PF used were culturally inappropriate. Qualitative analysis revealed that there were differences in frequency and type of style shifting even among the participants whose OPI ratings were the same. This study suggests that examining style shifting in Japanese conversation is a useful measurement for linguistic and cultural competence that may not be clear in an OPI rating. The findings further suggest that an EdA context in Japan is ideal learning environment for style shifting, examination of style shifting development can provide a better understanding of linguistic and cultural gain during EdA in Japan.

Key words
Style shifting, L2 acquisition of Japanese, education (study) abroad learning, assessment of linguistic and cultural gain

* I would like to thank the Office of International Affairs at OSU and National Federation of Modern Language Teachers Associations and the National Council of Less Commonly Taught Languages for their support to conduct this research. I would like to thank the seven students who participated in this study and anonymous reviewers who provided helpful feedback.

1. Introduction

The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages' (ACTFL) Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) test is a widely used proficiency test to measure US college students' oral proficiency gains during education abroad programs (Baker-Smemoe et al. 2014 etc.). The proficiency test holistically measures a student's oral abilities by examining the accuracy, content, tasks, and functions that he or she is capable.

However, relaying only on ACTFL OPI ratings to measure the outcome of a student may not reflect the whole picture of his or her improvement during education aboard (EdA) programs, and its sensitivity to subtle language gains has been pointed out in previous research (Kinginger 2009 etc.). For example, the range of oral proficiency required at each level increases as the proficiency level goes up, which may not provide a fair assessment for EdA students with higher oral proficiency at the start of their experience. Therefore, the relying on the OPI results does not provide a fair evaluation of the proficiency improvement of EdA students who started at a higher proficiency level.

In addition, OPI criteria for Novice, Intermediate, and Advanced Levels do not include culturally appropriate speech style. This becomes problematic as a measurement of EdA learning in two aspects. First, cultural knowledge is essential for communication, and using the target language (L2) outside of the framework of the target culture (C2) often lead to negative consequences (Walker and Noda 2010). Because the criteria place emphasis on being able to complete each task in the language, how a test taker completes such tasks is often ignored. In other words, skills that require L2 learners to communicate in a culturally appropriate way are often not considered in the OPI assessment as long as the test taker delivers the message to the tester.

Second, most of US college students who study abroad are at Intermediate to Advanced level L2 speakers, and those who are rated at Superior level or above are extremely rare in an EdA setting. Thus, relaying on OPI ratings only to measure the outcome of EdA learning is not sufficient for Novice and Advanced level learners. Considering these points, the assessment of a student's EdA learning must reflect the student's whole learning as much as possible.

The ability to conduct appropriate style shifting requires both the linguistic skill to produce the correct forms and the cultural knowledge to judge the appropriateness of the style in a given context. In addition, spoken data from an OPI can be used to analyze participants' style shifting development without collecting new data. By considering these points, the next section discusses the possibilities of examining style shifting as an additional measurement of EdA improvement in Japan.

2. Literature Review

Let us first look at the linguistic and pragmatic aspects of two forms, namely the *masu* form and plain form that represent different speech styles in Japanese. In the Japanese language, there are two main style forms, ones that end with *desu* or *masu* forms (hereafter *masu* forms) and the others that have more variety of endings (hereafter plain forms). Table 1 shows the two different forms within three different predicate types, namely verbal, adjectival, and nominal predicates.[1]

[1] Regarding the different types of predicates in Japanese, the current study follows the definitions by Jorden and Noda (1987). A verbal is a word whose form endings include *-masu* and *masita*. An adjectival is a word that includes the forms ending with *–i* and *–katta*. All other words are categorized as nominal. A nominal itself does not conjugate. A NP consists of one or more nominal words followed by a copula in some cases obligatory but other cases not (See Chapter Four for detailed discussion on NP without a copula).

Table 1. Plain forms and *masu* form in non-past/imperfective

	Plain form	***Desu/masu* form**
Verbal Predicate	*gakko e iku.*	*gakko e ikimasu.*
	(I go to school.)	(I go to school.)
Adjectival predicate	*ano hana wa tiisai.*	*ano hana wa tiisai desu.*
	(That flower is small.)	(That flower is small.)
Nominal predicate	*kore wa watasi no kaban da.*	*kore wa watasi no kaban da.*
	(This is my bag.)	(This is my bag)

As it is shown in Table 1, the English equivalents for both plain and *masu* forms are the same, but the social meanings in these two forms differ.

Plain forms are predominantly used in a casual conversation between persons whose relationship is personal and informal. *Masu* forms, on the other hand, indentify the speaker's "solicitude toward and maintaining some linguistic distance from the addressee (Jorden and Noda 1987:32)." Unlike English, there is no neutral form in Japanese,[2] and a speaker has to choose a form depending on the contexts. However, research on style shifting by Japanese L1 speakers shows that the choice between the two style forms does not only depend on the formality of the speech setting or the closeness of those conversing.

2.1 Style shifting by Japanese L1 speakers

Japanese speakers often shift speech styles when talking to the same addressee in conversation (Maynard 1993, Cook 2008, etc.). Research suggested that factors that trigger style shifting differ depending on the context, such as a *masu* form predominant context or a plain form predominant context. Considering the formality of the OPI test, which the current research uses to analyze the participants' style shifting development, this section focuses on style shifting in the context where *masu* forms are predominantly used.[3]

Maynard (1993) attempts to explain these two forms (i.e. *desu/masu* and plain forms) by applying the concept of "addressee awareness." She claims that when a speaker is aware of the addressee as psychologically separate from him/herself, *masu* forms are used. Cook (2006) categorizes plain forms into two styles depending on how they are used: 1) informal speech style (IfSS) and 2) detached speech style (DtSS). IfSS plain forms (IfSS-PF) are often used with affect keys, such as a sentence-final particle, vowel lengthening, raising intonation, coalescence or certain voice qualities.

Researchers have found various uses of such plain forms that do not indicate intimacy toward the other speaker. Japanese speakers use such plain forms for soliloquy- like utterances, such as exclamatory expressions (Okazaki 1999), suddenly recalling something, and self-reflection (often shown by repeating a word or phrase) (Hudson 2011). In addition such plain forms are also used to co-construct ideas (Cook 2008) and to present background information (Makino 2002). The degree of such style shifting in a *masu* form predominant context differs depending on speakers, but L1 speakers utilize style shifting to avoid sounding too friendly or too formal (therefore, unfriendly) (Okamoto 1999).

[2] Japanese L1 speakers use an incomplete sentence as an avoidance strategy (Cook 2006).
[3] Makino (2002:124) calls such a discourse context as "SOTO-oriented".

2.2 Style shifting by Japanese L2 speakers

The ability to shift speech styles in Japanese is not an easy skill to acquire even for advanced language learners. Chen (2004) investigated Japanese conversations between Chinese L1 speakers of Japanese who were advanced graduate students of Japanese and L1 Japanese graduate students (as cited in Taguchi 2015).

Masuda (2010) compared the style shifting of six Japanese L1 students (two from each two-year junior college, four-year college and graduate school) and six Japanese L2 students (five of them were undergraduate students and one was a graduate student) in professor-student conversations. Masuda's comparison of style shifting between L1 speakers and L2 speakers elucidated that L2 speakers tend to shift their style less than L1 speakers in a *masu* form predominant context, which could result in sounding too formal or unfriendly (Okamoto 1999). On the other hand, L1 speakers utilize style shifting in order to not sound too formal but still maintain *masu* forms to express respect or formality to their addressees (i.e., their professors). Other studies also suggest that utilizing style shifting as a communication strategy is still generally difficult and some EdA students overused plain forms upon their return (Marriot 1995, Iwasaki 2008).

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

Seven undergraduate students in a Midwest university in the US participated in the current study. All of them completed EdA programs in Japan for nine months during the 2017-2018 academic year. Table 2 shows the participants' background information and OPI ratings prior to and after the EdA programs.

Table 2. Background information of the participants

Name	JPN Course Completion	Experience in Japan	OPI[4] Pre > Post
Anna	Level 3	3 weeks for EdA	NH > IL
Bobby	Level 3	3 weeks for EdA	IL > IM
Cathy	Level 2	0	IM > IH
Isabelle	Level 3	2 weeks for traveling	IH > IH
Frank	Level 3	3 weeks for EdA	NH > NH
Emma	Level 4	9 months + 3 weeks for EdA	IL > IM
Henry	Level 5	0	IH > AL

The levels of Japanese course completion ranged from level 2 (Cathy) to level 5 (Henry). The OPI rating before EdA programs ranged from NH (Anna) to IH (Emma and Henry), and NH (Anna) and AH (Henry) upon their returns. All participants had previous experience either in living in or visiting Japan except Cathy and Henry.

3.2 Procedure and data analysis

OPI interviews were conducted before and after the EdA programs in Japan, and were used as data in the current research. The interview data was transcribed for data analysis. For quantitative

[4] Novice-High (NH) Intermediate-Low (IL) Intermediate-Mid (IM) Intermediate-High (IH), and Advanced-Low (AL)

analysis, all sentence matrix predicates (SMP) were divided into plain form, *masu* forms, and fragments (i.e. incomplete sentences) using Iwasaki's (2008) data analysis. In addition, SMPs that were categorized as "other" is resulted from a speaker's lack of language proficiency.

For the qualitative analysis, I followed Cook's categorization of IfSS and DtSS for plain forms (Cook 2000). In addition, I extended the category of DtSS plain forms (DtSS-PF) not only to the one described above, but also to non-IfSS-PF that discussed in previous research (Cook 2008, Hudson 2011, Makino 2002, Masuda 2010, Okazaki 1999). Judgment of IfSS-PF and DtSS-PF are based on types of functions (i.e., soliloquy-like utterances, utterances for co-constructing ideas) as well as existence of affect keys, such as intonations (i.e., raising intonation or falling intonation). The tone, volume, and speed of an utterance were also considered. If a speaker said "*seikatu*" with a raising intonation and indicated that the speakers wanted to request a clarification of its meaning, it is marked as IfSS-PF. On the other hand, after a participant hears the word and repeats it with a falling intonation and a soft voce, then it is categorized as DtSS-PF because it is interpreted that the participant was trying to figure out or recall the meaning of the word by him or herself instead of asking a question to the interviewer. DtSS-PF includes a self-reflective partial repetition (Hudson 2011) that exclaims or suddenly recalls something and utterances that are categorized as impersonal speech style, such as utterances used for co-construction of ideas (Cook 2008).

4. Findings

4.1 Quantitative Analysis

Table 3 shows the total numbers of predicates and SMPs in pre- and post-EdA OPIs. It also includes the number and proportion of *masu* form SMPs, plain form SMPs, fragments and others. Numbers in the brackets are proportions, which calculated the number in each SMP type divided by the total number of SMP.

Table 3. Numbers and proportion of types of SMP

Name	**Pre-EdA OPIs**						**Post-EdA OPIs**					
	# of p[5]	**# of SMP**	**# of *masu* form**	**# of plain form**	**# of frg.**	**# of oth.**	**# of p**	**# of SMP**	**# of *masu* form**	**# of plain form**	**# of frg.**	**# of oth.**
Anna	72	63	55 [87.3]	6 [10.0]	0 [0]	2 [3]	88	82	64 [78.0]	12 [14.6]	5 [6]	1 [1]
Bobby	140	108	83 [76.8]	21 [19.4]	2 [2]	2 [2]	109	87	68 [78.1]	13 [15]	6 [7]	0
Cathy	133	103	84 [81.6]	14 [13.6]	5 [5]	0	236	156	122 [78.2]	28 [17.9]	6 [4]	0
Isabelle	120	103	95 [92.2]	7 [7]	1 [1]	0	175	71	54 [76.0]	10 [12.7]	7 [10]	0
Frank	235	144	131 [91]	10 [7]	3 [2]	0	293	175	130 [74.3]	32 [18.9]	9 [5.1]	4 [2]
Emma	216	118	109 [92.3]	6 [5]	3 [3]	0	217	104	72 [69.2]	19 [18.3]	10 [9.6]	3 [3]
Henry	142	114	109 [95.6]	2 [2]	3 [2]	0	195	117	87 [75]	17 [14.5]	14 [12]	0 [0]

[5] Predicate (p), fragment (frg), and other (oth)

Four participants, Anna, Cathy, Frank, and Henry, increased the numbers of SMPs in the post-EdA OPIs. In other words, they produced more sentences in their utterances. In addition, although some participants who produced fewer SMPs in post-EdA OPI than pre-EdA OPI, they increased the number of predicates they used, which indicates they produced longer and more structurally complicated sentences in their utterance. Because the length of an OPI test tends to be longer (at maximum thirty minutes), the number of predicates used tends to correspond with a test taker's level at the lower levels (i.e., Novice to Intermediate-Low levels).

All of the participants used predominantly *masu* forms before and after their EdA programs in Japan. However, the proportion of plain forms became larger in the post-EdA OPIs than the pre-OPIs for all participants, except Bobby. This finding aligns with the findings in Iwasaki (2008) that learners increased their use of plain forms after EdA in Japan. Masuda's (2010) study also suggests that there are connection between use of plain forms and the experience of living in Japan. In terms of the use of fragments, all participants, except Cathy, slightly increased the use of this category of their utterance endings in post-EdA OPIs. Considering that L1 speakers used fragments more than L2 speakers (Masuda 2010), the increased use of fragments by the current participants suggests that their speech style became more similar to that of L1 speakers.

4.2 Qualitative Analysis

Prior to EdA programs in Japan, Bobby, Cathy and Isabelle used IfSS-PF in situations where showing deference was required (e.g., thanking and requesting). Because a speaker performs such speech acts with high awareness of the addressee, it is clearly considered an inappropriate use of IfSS-PF. Upon their returns, this IfSS-PF use was not observed or followed by self-correction, which is demonstrated below.

Excerpt 1 (Bobby, Post-EdA, rated Intermediate-Mid)

1	Isabelle	*tabun… sono onna no ko wa, takusan, chuugaku no ni-nen-see mitai na, anoo, keiken ga aru kedo,* (Maybe... that girl has many experiences in doing things, well, that eight-graders would likely do, but)
2	Isabelle >>	*sore wa chotto, muzukashii* ***yone.*** That is a little difficult SFP That is little bit, difficult, you know.
3	Isabelle >>	*anoo, amerika-jin ja nakere ba, chotto muzukashii to* ***omoimasu***. (Well, I think it is difficult (to understand it) if you are not an American.)

Up to line 1, Isabelle was describing what she meant by "*koukou-sei mitai na koto"* (things that high school students normally do) but her speech production seemed to have difficulties performing this task. In line 2, she expressed the difficulty by using an AP with multiple sentence final particles (SFP), *yone.* SFP *yo, ne,* and *yone* all request some changes in the interlocutor's cognition and it may add an "obtrusive" tone. Many speakers often avoid using it when talking to someone who holds a higher social status (Izuhara 2003). SFP *yone* in line 2 is clearly categorized as an inappropriate IfSS-PF. However, in line 3, she rephrased what she said by adding a more detailed explanation of why it was difficulties to understand with the *masu* form at the end. This indicates her linguistic and cultural knowledge on the appropriate speech style in the given context.

In addition, more participants used DtSS-PF actively. For example, most of the DtSS-PF in the pre-EdA OPIs were repetitions for self-reflections. Such DtSS –PF was used when the participants did not know the vocabulary or phrases that the interviewer mentioned. In post-EdA OPIs, however, many of DtSS-PF included functions of recalling (*nan datta kana, hondana dakke,*) exclamatory expression (*kurom bukku!*) and syntactic and semantic co-construction. The example of a DtSS-PF use for semantic co-construction is shown below.

Excerpt 2 (Bobby, Pre-EdA, rated Intermediate-Low)

1	Bobby	*a, amefuto, no, a, daigaku no, amefuto no sukyandaru ga arimashita.* (um, American football, well, there was a scandal of college American football.)
2	Interviewer	*hee, sore wa donna sukyandaru?* (Oh, what kind of scandal was it?)
3	Bobby	*anoo, a, a, amefuto no hito ga, anoo, hoka no hito ni takkuru shimashita.* (Well, um, a, a person (a player) from American football, well, did tackle another person (player).)
4	Bobby >>	*anoo…. Aa,* ***muzukashii****.* (Well… umm, it's difficult)
5	Bobby	*Aaa, purei, a, shitte, shitte imasu ka.* (Umm, *play*, a, do you know *play*?)
6	Interviewer	*purei?* (Play?)
7	Bobby >>	*amefuto no* ***purei****.* (Play in American football.)

In line 1, Bobby used *masu* forms to start describing news that he watched in Japan, but it seemed too complicated for him, which he confessed in line 4, with DtSS-PF. In line 5, he asked if the interviewer knew the meaning of "*pureii*" in *masu* form. This indicates he clearly understood the appropriate speech style when an utterance was directed to the interviewer. In line 6, the interviewer repeated the word "*purei*" with a rising intonation, which indicated that she did not know what "*purei"* was. In line 7, he used the plain form *amefuto no purei* in order to provide more information to the previously mentioned word *purei*. This nominal predicate without a copula is considered as a DtSS because it provided additional information to the previously mentioned *purei* (Makino 2002), and it sounded more natural with DtSS-PF than it would have with the *masu* form (i.e., *amefuto no purei desu.*).

Although most of the changes are considered improvement in style shifting, some of them were not. For example, Emma, who was able to use DtSS-PF, *nan da kke*, to mark her utterance for recalling as a soliloquy-like utterance, but upon her return, she repeatedly used *nan te iu* for the same speech acts, which is categorized as IfSS-PF. The question is, why did Emma, who was able to use the appropriate plain form before her EdA experience, start using the culturally inappropriate plain form after returning from Japan? There are two assumptions for this change. The first one is negative L1 transfer. In English, *"what is it called?"* is often used as a soliloquy-like utterance when recalling information. In this case, the change is indeed considered as a regression instead of improvement. The second assumption is that it is an incomplete utterance of *nan te iu n da kke*, which L1 speakers often use for recalling. If this is the case, she might have

heard L1 speakers use the phrase often enough to start incorporating in her speech, but she might lack the linguistic skill to produce the correct version of the phrase. It is worth mentioning that Emma completed level 4 Japanese the summer before her EdA experience. During the time, she learned the phrase *nan da kke* was used for recalling. Therefore, this might have accounted, at least partially, for her frequent use of *nan da kke* in the pre-EdA OPI which was conducted one month after her completion of the level four Japanese course.

Another example was Bobby's use of English (i.e., I forgot so many words…) in the post-EdA OPI, which he used to use DtSS-PF (*a, wasuretyatta*) appropriately in the pre-EdA OPI. Bobby learned *wasuretyatta* in the level 3 Japanese class, which he completed two months before his EdA program. This might be considered regression in his ability to use Japanese, in particular DtSS-PF for soliloquy.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The findings revealed that all participants except Bobby increased their use of plain forms after their EdA programs in Japan, but all of them still maintained predominantly *masu* forms. This suggests the participants' cultural knowledge on appropriate speech style in a given context but also their increased skill to avoid sounding too formal or unfriendly. Other findings such as non-use of inappropriate IfSS-PF in the post-EdA OPIs, and more active use of DtSS-PF suggest their EdA improvement in their style shifting abilities upon their returns. However, some changes could be considered as a regression rather than improvement, but without the participants' perspectives, it is difficult to determine the cause of such changes.

Considering some participants whose OPI rating did not change also demonstrated improvement in their style shifting abilities, this study suggests that examining style shifting in Japanese is a useful measurement for linguistic and cultural competence that may not be clear in an OPI rating.

References

Baker-Smemoe, Wendy, Dan Dewey, Jennifer Bown, and Rob Martinsen. (2014) Variables affecting L2 gains during study abroad. *Foreign Language Annals* 47.3, 464-486.

Cook, Haruko. (2008) Style shifts in Japanese academic consultations. In Kimberly Jones and Tsuyoshi Ono (eds.), *Style Shifting in Japanese*. 9-38. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Pub.

Hudson, Mutsuko. (2011) Student honorifics usage in conversations with professors. *Journal of Pragmatics* 43.15, 3689-3706.

Iwasaki, Noriko. (2008) Style shifts among Japanese learners before and after study abroad in Japan: Becoming active social agents in Japanese. *Applied Linguistics* 31.1, 45-71.

Jorden, Eleanor and Mari Noda. (1987) *Japanese: The Spoken Language (Part 1)*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Kinginger, Celeste. (2009) *Language Learning and Study Abroad: A Critical Reading of Research*. Houndsmills/Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave/Macmillan.

Makino, Seiichi. (2002) When does communication turn mentally inward? A case study of Japanese formal-to-informal switching. In Noriko Akatsuka and Susan Strauss. (eds.), *Japanese/Korean Linguistics* 10, 121–135.

Masuda, Kyoko. (2010) Nihongo gakusyuu-sya no buntai sifuto ni tsuite. [Japanese foreign

language learners' style shifting]. In Masahiko Minami (ed.), *Gengo-gaku to Nihongo-kyooiku no Tenkai to Hyousiki VI* [*Linguistics and Japanese Language Education VI: New directions in applied linguistics of Japanese*]. 191-212. Tokyo: Kurosio Syuppan.

Maynard, Senko K. (1993) *Discourse Modality: Subjectivity, Emotion, and Voice in the Japanese Language*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Okamoto, Shigeko. (1999) Situated politeness: Manipulating honorific and non-honorific expressions in Japanese conversations. *Pragmatics* 9.1, 51-74.

Taguchi, Noriko. (2015) *Developing Interactional Competence in a Japanese Study Abroad Context.* Bristol, NY: Multilingual Matters.

Walker, Galal and Mari Noda. (2010) Remembering the future: Compiling knowledge of another culture. In Galal Walker (ed.), *The Pedagogy of Performing Another Culture.* 22-50. Columbus, OH: National East Asian Languages Resource Center.

E-mail address: htobaru@fullerton.edu